

# DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 233 302

CS 007 175

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**TITLE** Dialects and Reading.  
**PUB DATE** Feb 83  
**NOTE** 36p.; Paper presented at the East York/Scarboro Reading Conference (Toronto, Canada, February 10-11, 1983).  
**PUB TYPE** Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses (070)

**EDRS PRICE** MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.  
**DESCRIPTORS** \*Attitude Change; \*Black Dialects; Elementary Secondary Education; \*Language Patterns; Miscue Analysis; Nonstandard Dialects; Reading Comprehension; Reading Difficulties; \*Reading Instruction; Reading Research; \*Reading Skills; Standard Spoken Usage; \*Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Role

## ABSTRACT

As studies indicate that dialect usage is not a barrier to reading, teachers can create an effective reading program for black students not by giving instruction in standard English, but by changing their own attitude toward black dialect. Showing that dialect users reencode standard English into their own language patterns when reading orally, Y. and K. Goodman's study found that many grammatical miscues are, in fact, signs of reading for meaning. The research suggests, therefore, that teachers need to treat students' home language with respect. Teachers without reading materials adapted to dialect can improve their teaching of dialect users if they effect changes in their own knowledge, attitudes, methods and materials, including (1) recognizing that students' cultural experiences will affect their reading comprehension, (2) learning more about students' dialect patterns, (3) accepting dialect miscues as evidence that students are comprehending what they read, and (4) focusing not on word identification but on larger strategies for improving comprehension, such as SQ3R (survey, question, read, recite, and review). (MM)

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ED233302

DIALECTS AND READING

A paper presented at the  
East York/Scarboro Reading Conference  
Toronto  
February 10 and 11, 1983

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## DIALECTS AND READING

Oddly enough, it was on a visit to Canada that I first realized I speak a dialect. I was a senior in college, and my best friend and I had stopped at a restaurant somewhere between Toledo and Toronto. As we were leaving the restroom, the cleaning woman asked if my friend came from northern Indiana and I from southern Indiana, as our speech suggested. Indeed, she was right. At this point, I have no idea what I said to give away my dialect origins. Perhaps I said "Wait till I warsh my hands," though I doubt it because my teachers had impressed upon me the fact that "warsh" was considered uneducated. Perhaps I asked if I could borrow a "pin" (pen) to write something down (in my dialect area, we say "pin" for pen). Or perhaps we were talking about the Vietnam "Wohr," which to me was the Vietnam "Wahr." In any case, the comment from that restroom dialectologist helped me understand that a dialect is not just the way they speak down South.

In his book Discovering American Dialects, Roger Shuy suggests that there are at least three degrees of understanding of what dialects are. "First, some people think that a dialect is something spoken by a white-bearded old man in an out-of-the-way area. Once we become aware of the fact that we all speak a dialect of some sort, we recognize dialects in a geographical sense, the second degree of understanding. The third degree of understanding comes when we realize that social layers exist within regional dialect areas" (1967, p. 3). I

would say that a fourth degree of understanding comes when we realize that from a linguistic point of view, all dialects are viable language systems. Linguistically, though not socially, all dialects are more or less equal.

It is with nonstandard or nonmainstream dialects rather than regional dialects that I want primarily to concern myself today, as we focus on dialects and reading. First, though, an explanation, perhaps sort of an apology, is in order. When I was asked to talk about dialects and reading at this conference, I objected, because I don't know anything about Canadian dialects. I was told that didn't matter since the principles are the same, and that you would be able to supply similar examples from your own community and teaching situation. Please forgive me, then, for focusing on U. S. dialects, particularly Black English, the nonmainstream dialect that has received the most attention from linguists and educators alike. What I want to do is talk a little about dialects, a little about dialects and reading, a little about reading itself, and then begin to tie it all together--focusing, of course, on what we as teachers need to know and do.

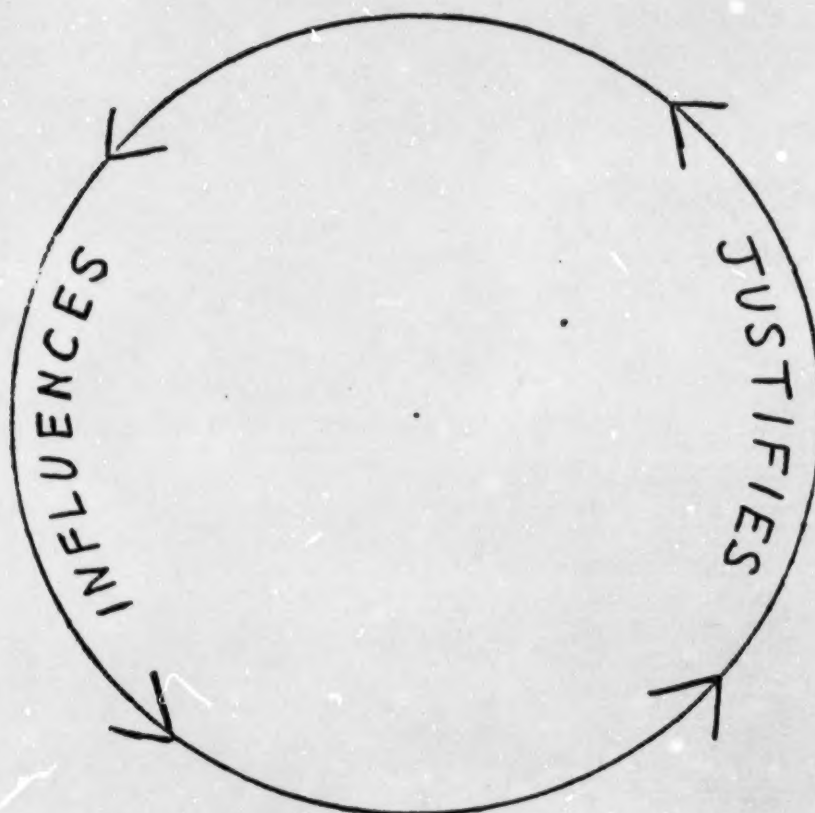
Back, then, to nonmainstream dialects. If you haven't heard the term "nonmainstream dialect" before, you may wonder what it means. The terms "nonstandard" and "nonmainstream" denote roughly the same thing: a dialect that differs in significant ways, particularly grammatical, from the dialect or dialects considered acceptable by those in power. I prefer the newer term "nonmainstream" because it indicates that the dialect is spoken by people who are not included within the mainstream of society. As linguists have demonstrated, there is nothing "wrong" with the language, the dialect, except insofar as it is spoken by people who lack the power to set standards for society as a whole.

We tend, though, to look down upon such dialects. Perhaps you've heard of Miss Fidditch, the fictionalized schoolmarm popularized by Martin Joos (1967). As James Sledd has noted, this stereotypical English teacher "taught generations of school children, including future linguists, to avoid ain't and double negatives and used to could and hadn't ought, not because ain't would keep them from getting ahead in the world [which of course it would], but because ain't was wrong, no matter who used it, and deserved no encouragement from decent people who valued the English language. . . . Miss Fidditch is not popular any longer among educators," Sledd continues, "though the world at large is still inclined to agree with her" (pp. 319-320 in Shores).

Unfortunately, I fear that many teachers still share this uninformed attitude of the world at large. In a large scale ETS study of Title I reading programs for the disadvantaged, Harste and Strickler noted that over 70% of the teachers in Title I programs generally believed that students had shortcomings in language and thought (1979, p. 71). Other studies show similar results. It's a vicious circle [insert 3-A]. We look down upon people we consider socially inferior. To justify our attitude, our condescension, we look for objective evidence. When we notice different dialect features, particularly different grammatical patterns, we convince ourselves that these are deficient, if not actually wrong. Then we use this perceived deficiency as justification for our attitude toward those who are not part of mainstream society.

In the Students' Right to Their Own Language statement issued in 1974 by the 4 C's, it is suggested that "We need to ask ourselves whether our rejection of students who do not adopt the dialect most familiar to us is based on any real merit in our dialect or whether we are actually rejecting the students themselves, rejecting them because of their racial, social, and cultural

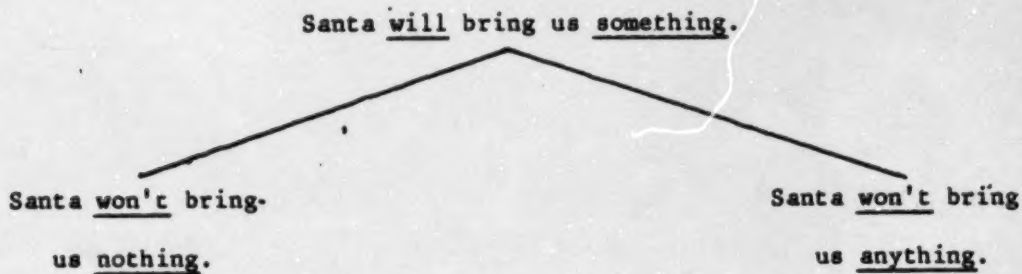
ATTITUDE OF SOCIAL  
SUPERIORITY



ATTITUDE  
TOWARD LINGUISTIC  
DIFFERENCES

origins" (1974, p. 2). Or as James Baldwin says, speaking of Black children and Black English dialect: "It is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised; It is his experience" (1981, p. 392).

In a landmark article titled "The Logic of Nonstandard English," William Labov demonstrated that nonmainstream dialects like Black English are not illogical, not cognitively or linguistically deficient, just different. Take, for example, a sentence like "Santa will bring us something."



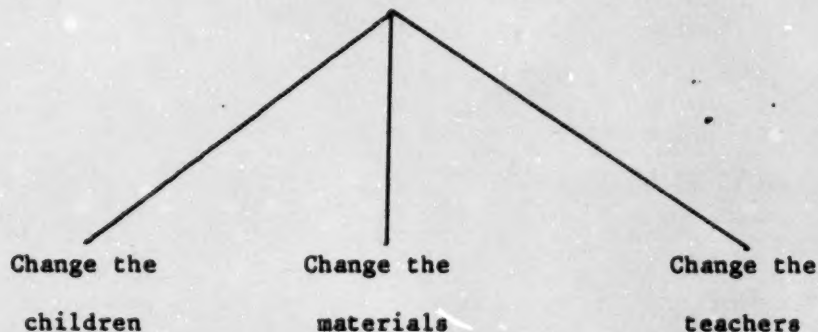
In nonmainstream dialects, the negative of this sentence is typically "Santa won't bring us nothing." Such a sentence is widely criticized because it contains the despised double negative (never mind that the double negative was "standard" in Shakespeare's day). What such critics fail to realize is that their own negative equivalent also contains two negative elements. To make the original sentence negative, we change will to won't and something to anything. As standard speakers, we too use a double negative. Neither kind of negative is linguistically deficient.

What does all of this have to do with reading? Since at least the mid 60's in the States, with the publication of the Coleman report, it has been recognized that minority students, typically students who speak a nonmainstream

dialect, tend to do less well on standardized reading tests than their white middle class counterparts. In short, they seem to be poorer readers.

Though denying that nonmainstream dialects were in any way inferior, sociolinguists of the late 60's and early 70's hypothesized that the dialect difference might be a major cause of reading difficulty. While some people were testing this hypothesis, others were proposing and testing solutions to the assumed problem. Here is a chart that shows, in general, the kinds of approaches suggested (see, for example, Wolfram 1970):

If there is a dialect barrier in learning to read, then



As you can imagine, no one has been very successful with the first alternative, "change the children"--that is, teach the children to speak standard English before teaching them to read. One investigator who tried this was Richard Rystrom. In a one-semester program, Rystrom concentrated on getting Black first graders to pronounce third singular verb endings such as "He walks" and "She goes" and to pronounce final consonants and final consonant clusters. At the end of the experiment, Rystrom concluded that "Dialect training had a negative effect upon decoding skills. The children who received instruction in dialect were able to read fewer words than the children who did not receive

dialect training" (1970, p.598).

The alternative of changing the materials has been tested much more extensively. Perhaps you have heard the apocryphal story of how this alternative came to be advocated for nonmainstream dialects. William Stewart, then with the Center for Applied Linguistics, was preparing a Black English "translation" of "The Night Before Christmas" to send as a Christmas greeting from the Center. Stewart reports the following:

One evening, while I was working at home on the translation of the poem (a draft of which was in my typewriter, with the original version at the side), two inner-city children dropped by for a visit. While I was busy getting some refreshments for them from the refrigerator, Lenora (then about twelve years old) went over to play with the typewriter and found the draft of the nonstandard version of the poem in it. Lenora was one of the "problem readers" of the public schools; she read school texts haltingly, with many mistakes, and with little ability to grasp the meaning of what she read. Yet, when she began to read the nonstandard version of the poem, her voice was steady, her word reading accurate, and her sentence intonation was natural (for her dialect, of course). --(1969, p. 172)

Surprised by this event, Stewart and his colleagues began experimenting with dialect readers. They retained standard spelling but attempted to reflect the grammar of the nonmainstream dialect. One of my favorite passages is a translation from the Bible (Wolfram and Fasold 1969, pp.150-151):

JOHN 3:1-17 [Black English Version]

It was a man named Nicodemus. He was a leader of the Jews. This man, he come to Jesus in the night and say, "Rabbi, we know you a teacher that come from God, cause can't nobody do the things you be doing 'cept he got God with him."

Jesus, he tell him say, "This ain't no jive, if a man ain't born over again, ain't no way he gonna get to know God."

Then Nicodemus, he ask him, "How a man gonna be born when he already old? Can't nobody go back inside his mother and get born."

So Jesus tell him, say, "This ain't no jive, this the truth. The onliest way a man gonna get to know God, he got

to get born regular and he got to get born from the Holy Spirit. The body can only make a body get born, but the Spirit, he make a man so he can know God. Don't be surprised just cause I tell you that you got to get born over again. The wind blow where it want to blow and you can't hardly tell where it's coming from and where it's going to. That's how it go when somebody get born over again by the Spirit."

So Nicodemus say, "How you know that?"

Jesus say, "You call yourself a teacher that teach Israel and you don't know these kind of things? I'm gonna tell you, we talking about something we know about cause we already seen it. We telling it like it is and you-all think we jiving. If I tell you about things you can see and you-all think we jiving and don't believe me, what's gonna happen when I tell about things you can't see? Ain't nobody gone up to Heaven 'cept Jesus, who come down from Heaven. Just like Moses done hung up the snake in the wilderness, Jesus got to be hung up. So that the peoples that believe in him, he can give them real life that ain't never gonna end. God really did love everybody in the world. In fact, he loved the people so much that he done gave up the onliest Son he had. Any man that believe in him, he gonna have a life that ain't never gonna end. He ain't never gonna die. God, he didn't send his Son to the world to act like a judge, but he sent him to rescue the peoples in the world."

As you can imagine, most of the dialect materials have been intended for beginning readers, that is children who are just learning to read. In the late 60's, the Board of Education of Chicago issued a sequence of eight dialect readers, each with an "everyday talk" version and a "school talk" version. Lloyd Leaverton reported that in their third year of instruction, "The group that was given both the EVERYDAY TALK version and the SCHOOL TALK version of the reading materials excelled in 19 of the 20 variables investigated with respect to mean word recognition errors. The control group were children who were instructed by the same teacher but who were only given the SCHOOL TALK version of the materials (Leaverton, n.d., p.9).

Experiments with other dialect readers, however, did not strongly support the hypothesis that dialect materials would be easier for nonmainstream speakers

to read. In a study involving second graders, Rudine Sims had Black English-speaking students read from two different booklets, one written in standard dialect patterns and one written to approximate the grammatical patterns of Black English. Sims found that in reading aloud, the children shifted from the Black dialect of the text to standard English more often than in the opposite direction (Sims, 1972). A study by Simons and Johnson (1974) produced the same result. However, both studies involved children who had already learned to read using standard texts, so the studies do not really disprove the idea that dialect interference causes some difficulty in learning to read. In a 1982 summary of such studies as these, Troutman and Falk concluded that "There is little evidence to support the concept of BE interference in the reading performance of black children. However, because of a number of problems in the existing research, we cannot yet say with confidence that BE has no effect on reading performance (1982, p. 128). Other recent surveys of the literature have drawn the same conclusion.

Roger Shuy points out that "the dialect reader projects in the early 70's proved little or nothing largely because they focused only on the forms of language, not on the functions (1980, p. 4). Thus to the extent that dialect reading materials are valuable, it may be more because of their functional and cultural appropriateness than because of their grammatical appropriateness to the students reading them. This is an important point, one I will return to later. For now, however, I would like to return to the third suggestion for overcoming the alleged dialect interference problem, namely changing the teachers.

In the last decade or so, it has become increasingly obvious to many of us that we needed to change our perspective on reading. Until the advent of people

like Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman, one of the hallowed myths of reading instruction was that good reading is letter-perfect reading, that accurate word identification is an absolute prerequisite to understanding. Thus, before Smith and Goodman, we were repeatedly told that a selection is probably too difficult for a student's independent reading if he or she misreads more than one or two words out of a hundred. If a student misread more than five or six words, the selection was often considered too difficult for instructional reading. The figures differ somewhat from one authority to another, but the "correct" identification of words was--and all too often still is--assumed to be necessary for comprehension. To put it bluntly, this common-sense view is simply not accurate.

While reading a text, all readers have three kinds of language cues available to them. One kind of cue is grapho/phonetic, how the word looks and how the letters correspond to sounds. A second kind of cue is syntactic, the grammar of the sentence. Finally, the reader has access to semantic cues, to the meaning of the text itself and to his or her entire storehouse of knowledge and experience. We can see which language cues a reader is using when the reader makes a miscue--that is, when what the reader says differs from what the text says. Let's look, for a moment, at some examples.

|                      |                                                                            |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Grapho/phonetic cues | The girls of the <sup>vengil</sup> village did not go to school . . .      |
| Syntactic cues       | "The little <sup>truck</sup> monkey had it."                               |
| Semantic cues        | . . . to see if there was any danger. He heard the <sup>afraid</sup> . . . |

Good readers are those whose miscues typically preserve meaning, whether or

not the miscues bear close graphophonic resemblance to the words of the text.

Take, for example, these miscues from a first grader:

<sup>sticked</sup>  
Morris stuck out his tongue.  
<sup>not getting anything</sup>  
I'm getting nothing for Christmas. (a line from a song)  
<sup>mean inside</sup>  
"No, no," said Boris. "I don't mean outside."  
<sup>didn't do</sup>  
Boris growled, "That's because you did it the wrong way."  
(Reader started to say, "You didn't do it right.")

Now let's look at the miscues of a sixth grade boy reading part of an O'Henry story, "Jimmy Hayes and Muriel."

After a hearty supper Hayes jointed the smokers about <sup>around</sup>  
the fire. His appearance did not <sup>at all</sup> settle all the questions in the  
minds of his brother rangers. They saw simply a loose,  
<sup>young</sup>  
lank youth with tow-colored sunburned hair and a berry-  
<sup>ingenious</sup>  
brown, ingenious face that wore a quizzical, good natured  
smile.

"Fellows," said the new ranger, "I'm goin' to interduce  
you to a lady friend of mine. Ain't ever heard anybody  
<sup>much about</sup>  
call her a beauty, but you'll all admit she's got some fine  
points about her. Come along, Muriel!"

He held open the front of his blue flannel shirt. <sup>toad</sup> Out of  
it crawled a horned frog. A bright red ribbon was tied  
jauntily around its spiky neck. It crawled to its owner's  
<sup>the</sup>  
knee and <sup>it</sup> sat there motionless.

"This here <sup>is</sup> Muriel," said Hayes, with an oratorical wave of his hand; "she's got qualities. She never talks back, she always stay<sup>s</sup> at home, and she's satisfied with one red dress for everyday and Sunday, too."

"Look at that blame<sup>d</sup> insect!" said one of the rangers with a grin. "I've seen plenty of them horny <sup>toads</sup> frogs, but I never knew anybody to have one for a side partner. Does the blame thing know you from anybody else?"

"Take it <sup>her</sup> over there and see," said Hayes.

If we were to judge by a simple word count we would conclude that this passage is too difficult for Jay, since he has read only 91% of the words correctly. Yet it is obvious that Jay is attending to meaning, that he is comprehending the text and partially recoding it into his own surface structure. Surely we would not conclude that Jay is a candidate for remedial reading instruction on the basis of this reading performance. As a matter of fact, Jay was the top student in his class.

Jay exemplifies what good readers in general do: they make minimal use of graphophonic cues and maximal use of syntactic and semantic cues in a search for meaning. Thus a model of proficient oral reading might look something like this:



The validity of this model is particularly evident in some of Paul Koler's studies of bilingual subjects. When Koler's subjects read aloud two passages

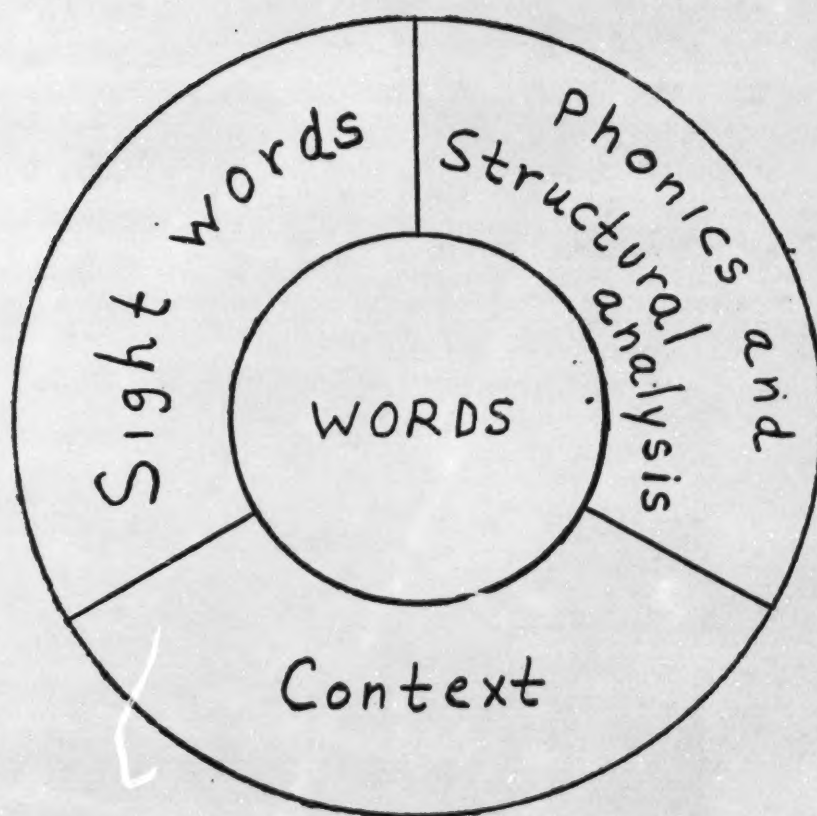
with French and English words mixed, they sometimes substituted French words for the English words on the page, and vice versa (Kollers, 1966). That is, they went from the graphic input directly to meaning and then reencoded that meaning into the other language.

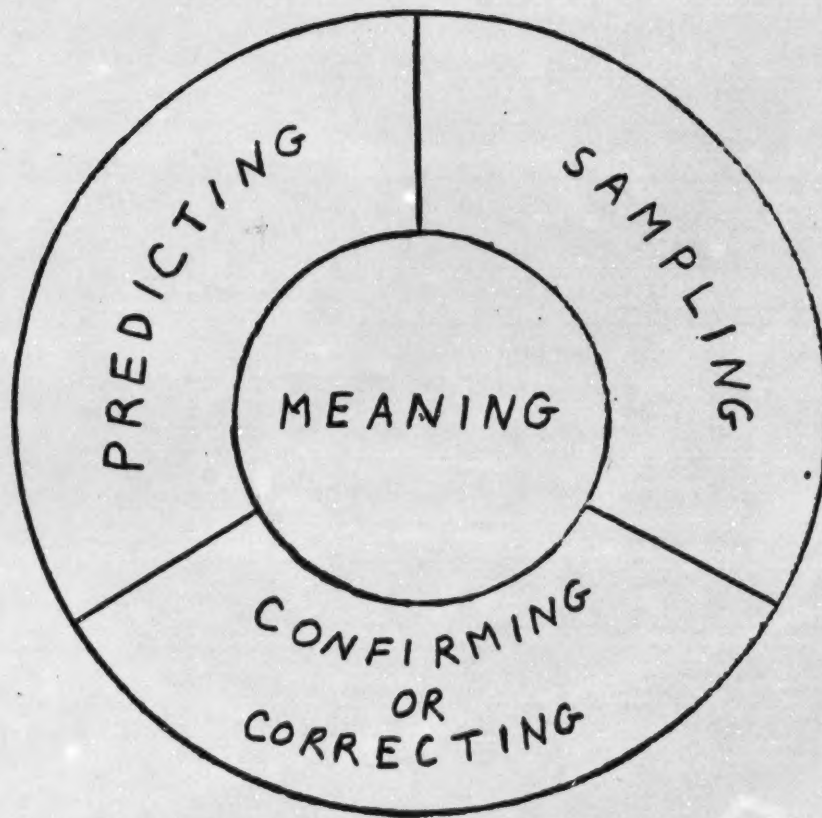
His horse, followed de deux bassets, faisait la terre resonner under its even tread. Des gouttes de verglas stuck to his manteau. Une violente brise was blowing. One side de l'horizon lighted up, and dans la blancheur of the early morning light, il apercut rabbits hopping at the bord de leurs terriers.

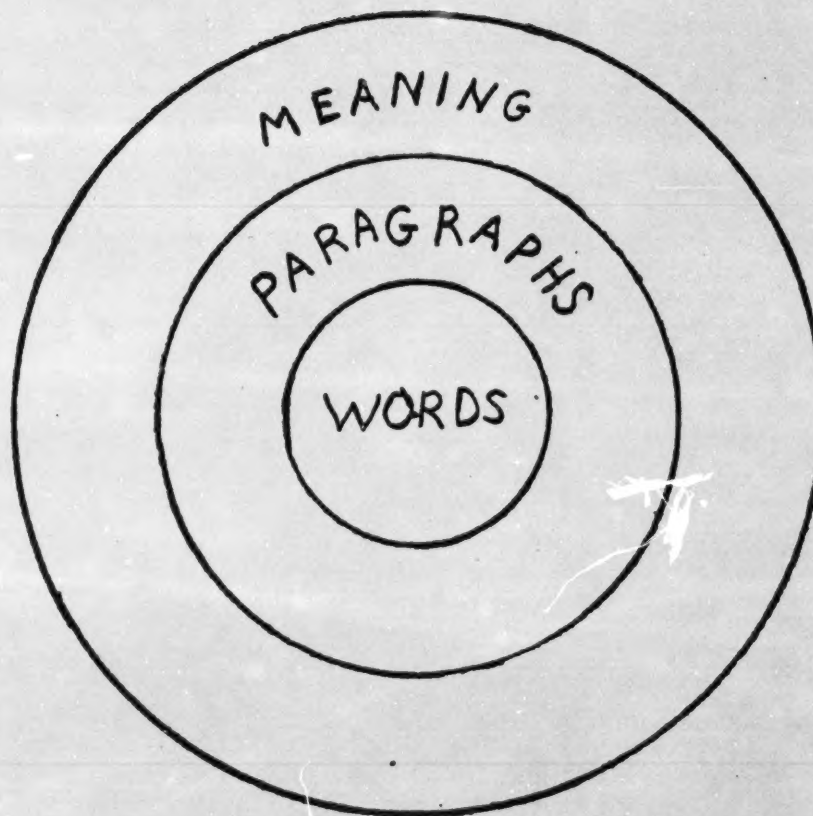
Son cheval, suivi by two hounds, en marchant d'un pas egal, made resound the earth. Drops of ice se collaient a son cloak. A wind strong soufflait. Un cote of the horizon s'eclaircit; et, in the whiteness du crepuscule, he saw des lapins sautillant au edge of their burrows.

As we can see from the model and from these examples, the good reader goes from the visual representation to meaning and then to oral output. This view of reading is called psycholinguistic because it emphasizes the interaction between the mind of the reader and the language of the text.

Let's look at some contrasting models of reading instruction. At the elementary level, most instructional approaches focus on the word, on using various cues to identify words [insert 12-A]. In contrast, what we need is an approach that focuses on meaning [insert 12-B]. At the secondary level and above, the typical approach is also to focus on the word, on vocabulary development, and next on the paragraph--for example, on determining the main idea of a paragraph, on drawing inferences, and so forth [insert 12-C]. "Remedial" reading students rarely have the opportunity to deal with stretches of discourse larger than the paragraph--except in content area subjects where, of course, such students scarcely know how to deal with the assignments. Thus at the







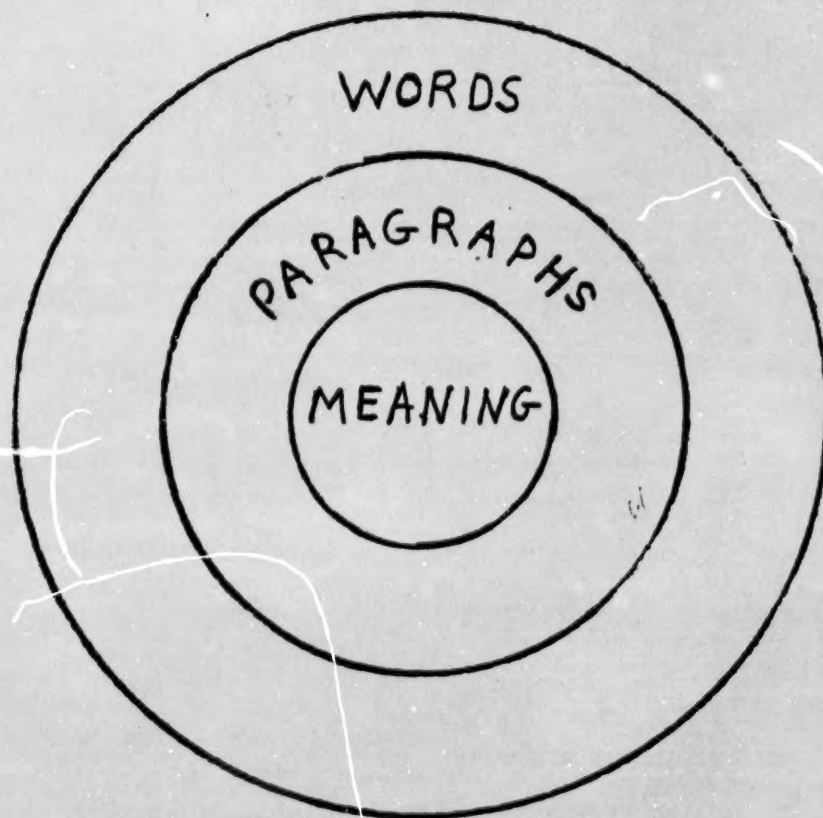
intermediate and secondary levels we need to focus more of our instruction on how to approach the larger units of discourse that students face elsewhere [insert 13-A]. We need, for example, to guide students in learning to preview a reading selection; to turn headings into questions and to read to find the answers to their questions; to take effective notes, using not only traditional indented note style but charts, diagrams, time lines, branching trees, and so forth; and to review and recite their notes. Time permits little more than name-dropping here, but we need to explore with our students such reading/thinking/study procedures as the DRTA (directed reading/thinking activity), SQ3R (survey, question, read, recite, review), and ConStruct, a procedure for rereading and taking increasingly detailed notes. All of these techniques can best be taught, I think, in heterogenous classes of good and poorer readers, regardless of what dialect they speak.

But I would like to return now to the specific problems of students who speak a nonmainstream dialect. What about their reading miscues, the dialect-related errors they make in reading a text?

We need to understand these dialect miscues within the framework presented a few minutes ago. That is, we need to understand that miscues which reflect students' phonological or grammatical system are simply evidence that the readers are doing what good readers do: reading for meaning and reencoding that meaning into their own language patterns. Here are some common kinds of grammatical miscues that Kenneth Goodman and Catherine Buck found in working with innercity black children (1973, p.9):

1. Absence of past tense marker

look for looked, call for called, wreck for wrecked,  
love for loved, pound for pounded, help for helped, use  
 for used, run for ran, have for had, keep for kept, do  
 for did



2. Absence of plural noun marker  
~~thing~~ for things, ~~work~~ for works, ~~story~~ for stories,  
~~prize~~ for prizes
3. Absence of third person singular verb marker  
~~look~~ for looks, ~~work~~ for works, ~~hide~~ for hides
4. Absence of possessive noun or pronoun marker  
~~Freddie~~ for Freddie's, ~~Mr. Vine~~ for Mr. Vine's, ~~one~~  
for one's, ~~it~~ for its
5. Substitution and omission of forms of to be  
~~was~~ for were, ~~is~~ for are, ~~we~~ for we're, ~~he be talking~~  
for he'd been talking
6. Hypercorrections (the use of two grammatical markers of the same type)  
~~likeded~~ for liked, ~~helpeded~~ for helped, ~~stoppped~~ for stopped

More recently, Ken and Yetta Goodman and their associates have completed a massive study (1978) of miscues among 2nd, 4th and 6th graders who speak a nonmainstream dialect or who speak English as a second language. The dialect groups were downeast Maine, Mississippi black, Appalachian, and Hawaiian Pidgin. The second language groups were Texas Spanish, Hawaiian Samoan, Arabic, and Navajo. The most common kind of grammatical miscue, for both the dialect speakers and the ESL speakers, was again the absence of grammatical inflections on the ends of words. The following example from a Navajo fourth grader shows both phonological and grammatical miscues that reflect the reader's language system, as well as some possible hypercorrections:

<sup>Dere</sup> There was a tall flat rock <sup>fall rocks</sup> <sup>about</sup> <sup>there</sup> by the grass where the sheep were, and  
<sup>Sally</sup> Salt Boy climbed up on it. From there he could watch the sheep, and  
if he <sup>turns</sup> turned around and <sup>learn up</sup> leaned over, he could see the cave that <sup>hide</sup> held  
<sup>at down</sup> that thing he had found.

<sup>from</sup>  
 He remembered the morning he had found it there. At first, when he  
 saw it in the cave, he had <sup>thoughten</sup> thought it was a snake, and he had felt it with  
 a long stick, and moved <sup>it</sup>, and turned <sup>it</sup> over. When the stick <sup>to-</sup> told  
 him it was a thing <sup>wisout</sup> without life, he had gone close to it, and put his hand  
<sup>under when</sup> on it. It wasn't until then he had <sup>know- its</sup> known it was a rope.

<sup>put</sup>  
 He had pulled it carefully <sup>ly</sup> and slowly out of the darkness in the cave.  
 When he had sat on the ground and looked <sup>at</sup> it, and felt it, and <sup>for</sup> held it, and <sup>hurt</sup> held it.  
 He had done <sup>what he its</sup> that with it all day, until it was time to take <sup>his mother's</sup> his mother's  
<sup>pas</sup> sheep back up the canyon path. Then he had coiled it very slowly, <sup>When couldn't</sup> and  
 put it back in the cave's darkness.

From this impressive study, the Goodmans conclude that there is "no  
 evidence that inability to cope with Book English is a general problem for any  
 group" (1978, p. 3-5). The students' dialect or language influence is evidence  
 in their reading, "but it is not in itself a barrier to comprehension"  
 (p. 3-22). In fact, in an earlier study of children who speak Black English,  
 researcher Barbara Hunt found it was the best readers who produced the most  
 dialect-based miscues (1974-75). In their recent study, the Goodmans point out  
 that special reading materials are not needed for any of the low-status dialect  
 groups studied, nor is special methodology needed (p. 8-5). What is needed, is  
 a positive attitude toward reading miscues in general and toward dialect and ESL  
 miscues in particular.

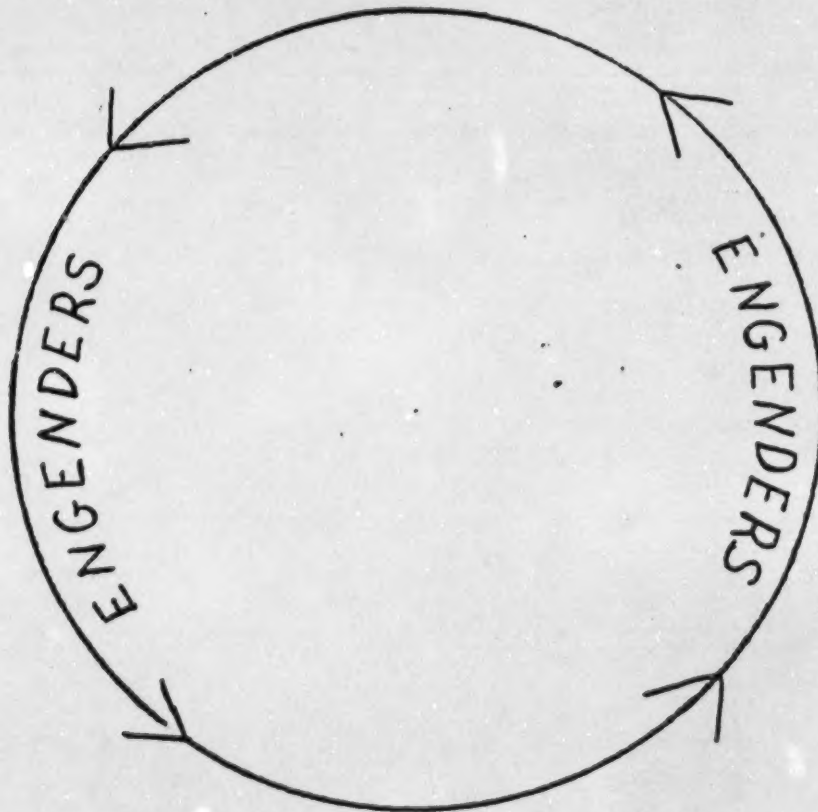
This point can hardly be emphasized enough. In a survey in which 94  
 Midwestern elementary teachers rated miscues as acceptable or unacceptable,  
 Tovey (1979) found that when miscues were syntactically and semantically  
 appropriate, only 16% of the teachers would not accept the miscues. However,

when the miscues reflected translation into the reader's dialect, 60% of the teachers would not accept the miscues. An earlier study by Cunningham produced similar results (1977). Teachers, then, must have the knowledge, the experience, and the attitudes that will enable them to recognize and accept miscues that merely reflect an alternative spoken dialect. A book you might find highly useful is Attitudes, Language, and Change, by Anne Gere and Eugene Smith (NCTE 1979). Perhaps if we study dialect patterns and come to appreciate nonmainstream dialects as viable language systems, we can initiate a productive--rather than a "vicious" circle [insert 16-A].

"Change the teachers" is essentially the mandate provided by the famous--or infamous--Ann Arbor decision of 1979, in which a group of black children charged that the school system failed to take into account the barrier posed by their home language in learning to read. In and of itself, the language, the dialect, of these children was not found to be a barrier to learning to read. Rather, the language barrier was defined as the failure of the teachers to take into account the home language or dialect of the children in trying to teach them to read standard English (Ann Arbor Decision, p. 9.).

In response to the Ann Arbor case and Judge Joiner's opinion, the Black Caucus of the NCTE has further stated that: "The Black English language system of itself is not a barrier to learning. The barrier is negative attitudes toward the language system, lack of information about the system, inefficient techniques for teaching language skills, and an unwillingness to adapt teaching styles to student learning needs." In the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary, it is thus generally agreed that if speakers of nonmainstream dialects do have a language barrier that makes it more difficult for them to learn to read, then that language barrier exists primarily in minds and attitudes of

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RESPECT FOR  
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teachers, those school personnel who work most directly with the children. We must come to understand the patterned nature of the dialects we deal with, in part to recognize dialect miscues and avoid correcting or penalizing them, but more broadly to appreciate and respect those who speak such dialects. Still more broadly, we must deepen our understanding of the reading process and of the effect our students' background has upon their reading ability and upon their performance on standardized tests.

To further explore these latter topics, I'd like you to indulge me in a little experiment. I'm going to read you the first two paragraphs of a letter written by a teenager to his friend. Then I'll ask you to read the third paragraph for yourselves, and to write down a one-or-two-sentence summary of what the third paragraph says (Reynolds et.al., 1982).

Dear Joe,

I bet you're surprised to be hearing from your old friend Sam. It's been a long time since you moved away so I thought I'd drop you a line to catch you up on what's going on around here. Things haven't changed much. The weather's been really bad but we've only been let out of school a couple days. Everybody in the family is O.K., and my cousin is still asking about you. School has been going O.K. but I did get in some trouble last week.

It started out as a typical Thursday. Typical that is until lunchtime; at that point things started to get interesting. But don't let me get ahead of myself. I'll start at the beginning. Renee, my sister, and I were almost late for school. Renee had had trouble getting her chores done and I couldn't leave without her. We barely caught our ride and made it to school just as the tardy bell rang.

Classes went at their usual slow pace through the morning, so at noon I was really ready for lunch. I got in line behind Bubba. As usual the line was moving pretty slow and we were all getting pretty restless. For a little action Bubba turned around and said, "Hey, Sam! What you doin' man? You so ugly that when the doctor delivered you he slapped your face!" Everyone laughed, but they laughed even harder when I shot back, "Oh yeah? Well, you so ugly the doctor turned around and slapped your momma!" It got even wilder when Bubba said, "Well man, at least my daddy ain't no girl-scout!" We really got into it then. After a while more

people got involved--4, 5, then 6. It was a riot! People helping out anyone who seemed to be getting the worst of the deal. All of sudden Mr. Reynolds the gym teacher came over to try to quiet things down. The next thing we knew we were all in the office. The principal made us stay after school for a week; he's so straight! On top of that, he sent word home that he wanted to talk to our folks in his office Monday afternoon. Boy! Did I get it when I got home. That's the third notice I've gotten this semester. As we were leaving the principal's office, I ran into Bubba again. We decided we'd finish where we left off, but this time we would wait until we were off the school grounds.

Well, I have to run now. I've got to take out the trash before Mom gets home. Write soon and let me know what's going on with you.

Later,

Sam

How many of you said, in one way or another, that the young people had gotten into a fight, a physical confrontation? How many of you thought that the battle was merely verbal, not physical? If the latter, you're right. What Sam was describing to his friend Joe was an instance of "sounding" or "playing the dozens," a form of ritual insult found predominantly among black males. When black and white eighth grade students tried to recall the letter and responded to questions about its content, the white students (who were from an agricultural area) tended to describe the events as "horrible," described the two participants as angry, and generally recalled the event as a fight:

Soon there was a riot all the kids were fighting.

Me and Bubba agreed to finish our fight later, off

the school grounds.

The black students, in contrast, more often recognized that the participants were just joking, just having fun. In fact when told that white students tended to interpret the letter as being about a fight instead of sounding, one of the black students looked surprised and said, "What's the matter? Can't they read?"

(Reynolds et. al., p. 365).

We need, then, to consider "where students are coming from" when they approach the reading that we assign them and when we interpret their results on tests, both standardized and teacher-made. Nix and Schwarz (1979) interviewed ten inner-city high school students, asking them to explain answers to test questions. The investigators found that these students brought to bear a different system of assumptions than members of the majority culture. This led them to answers which were often "wrong," but which generally made sense from their perspective. As Reynold et al. point out,

The research on cultural schemata [the cultural framework one brings to bear] has implications for the education of minority children. Standardized tests, basal reading programs, and content area texts lean heavily on the conventional assumption that meaning is inherent in the words and structure of a discourse. When prior knowledge is required, it is assumed to be knowledge common to children from every background. When new information is introduced, it is assumed to be as accessible to one child as to the next. The question that naturally arises is whether children from different subcultures can generally be assumed to bring to bear a common schema. (1982, p. 356)

This brings us full circle almost, back to the question of dialect reading materials. One such reading program recently developed is Bridge: A Cross-Cultural Reading Program, published by Houghton Mifflin (Simpkins, Holt, Simpkins, 1977). Similar to the earlier dialect readers for elementary students, the Bridge program begins with instruction in the students' own dialect--in this case, Black English--and moves through a transition stage to instruction in Standard English. Here is a sample of a passage written in the three different versions.

**Black Vernacular:**

Well anyway, Jerry Porter's jaws was tight. There was this broad on his gig who . . . bugged the Brother to no end

. . . He couldn't find no dictionary so he split on down to the library . . . He ask the lady there 'bout books to help him learn some big words like redundancy. She turn him on to this book call **Thirty Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary**.

**Transition:**

He was mad. . . But it wasn't just his job that made him mad. It was a certain woman, name Mrs. Thompson . . . He didn't have a dictionary so he went down to the public library . . . He asked (the librarian) for a book to help him. She showed him a book called **Thirty Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary**.

**Standard English:**

(He) even thought that some people were put on this earth just to make his life more difficult. He thought about one woman in particular. She was a woman he worked with. . . He explained to the librarian that he wanted to increase his vocabulary. She recommended a book **Thirty Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary**.

Typically the stories vary somewhat from one version to another, so that students cannot merely rely on memory as they move from a BE version to a transitional version and finally to an SE version. The program consists of five booklets of readings, accompanied by skills books. These skills books are likewise written in two or three versions. For example, a lesson on figurative language is presented in a Black English version, which is followed by a standard version with different examples. Here is part of the BE lesson on figurative language:

**FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE--BLACK ENGLISH**

**What you gonna learn:** To dig on talk that saying more than what the words really mean.

**Check this out:** You got what they call figurative language when you come across words that saying somethng but ain't really saying what it saying. To understand this here figurative language thing, to really put it together, you got to use a little taste of imagination. You can't be using the exact meaning of the words.

What you got to do is trip on the picture that the words be painting for you.

Now dig this: Suppose you was to hear two Brothers talking. And suppose one of them was to say to the other:

Man, that Billy, he fat as a rat in a cheese factory.

Now, what you think the Brother saying 'bout Billy? Now you know he ain't saying that Billy overweight. And he ain't trying to get down on Billy by saying he ugly as a rat eating cheese. What he saying is that Billy he got a lot of bread, or that Billy got over, or that Billy got it made.

Now, if you was to have to pick one of the four meanings from what the Brother said, which one would you pick? Put a circle around a, b, c, or d.

- (a) Billy got fat because he ate too much cheese.
- (b) Billy looked like a fat rat.
- (c) Billy had everything he needed to get over.
- (d) Billy was as ugly as a rat in a cheese factory.

(c) is correct.

According to the authors, the Bridge program has been field tested with students from the 7th through the 12th grades in four major cities and one rural area in the U.S. (Chicago, Phoenix, Washington, Memphis, and Macon County, Alabama). In the field test, "the average gain in grade equivalent scores for the group using Bridge was 6.2 months for four months of instruction compared to only an average gain of 1.6 months of instruction for students in their regular scheduled classroom reading activities. . . .The group not using Bridge displayed the all too typical pattern of falling further behind the mainstream student at each grade level" (Simpkins and Simpkins, p. 238).

I personally am convinced that the success of this program lies above all in respect--respect for the students' language and culture. Studies of inner-city schools that succeed in teaching reading show that a positive attitude toward the students is an important factor. In general, this means "treating everything intrinsic to the student, including his home language, as positive and worthwhile" (see Venezky 1981, p. 195). Thus I suspect it is not the use of

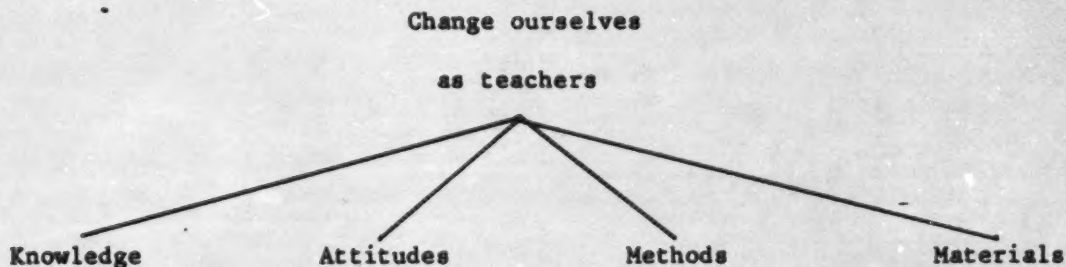
Black English grammar per se that makes a difference in the Bridge materials but rather the fact that the authors and teachers respect the dialect enough to have incorporated it in these reading materials. In addition, the vocabulary, the cultural perspective, and the rhythms of the lessons and readings on the accompanying cassette tapes are bound to convince nonmainstream students that this is a program designed for them, a program that appreciates their strengths instead of viewing them as culturally, linguistically, and academically deficient.

Unless you have a relatively homogenous class of nonmainstream students, it may not be possible to use--much less wheedle publishers into producing--such materials for your own students. What you can do, though, is this:

1. Learn more about the dialect patterns reflected in your students' speech.
2. Adopt a positive attitude toward your students' dialects.
3. Accept dialect miscues as evidence that students are comprehending what they read.
4. Focus not on word identification or vocabulary study, but upon strategies for predicting, sampling, confirming and correcting--for monitoring ongoing comprehension. Help students develop strategies for processing larger units of text, using procedures such as DRTA (directed reading-thinking activity), SQ3R (survey, question, read, recite, review), ConStruct, and so forth.
5. Recognize that your students' cultural experiences, beliefs, and values will affect what they comprehend in reading, and adjust your interpretation of test results accordingly.

6. Try to determine whether your students have the cultural and conceptual background for what they are asked to read. If not, try to provide that background through films and filmstrips, recordings, discussion, and so forth.
7. Use culturally relevant reading material, including not only published literature but student written "experience" stories, written transcripts of interviews with older members of the community, and so forth. According to Harber 1981, p. 174, "Research has shown that use of relevant curriculum materials has a positive effect on the culturally different students' reading achievement."

In short, then, what our nonmainstream dialect speakers need most is for us to change ourselves as teachers.



We need to deepen our understanding of dialects and the reading process, to modify certain of our attitudes, to reconsider and revise our methods, and perhaps even to select and to guide students in generating new materials. Notice I said that "We must change ourselves." No conference speaker, no inservice workshop leader, no administrator can do it for us, though all of these can stimulate and facilitate change, and a concomitant change in administrators may be necessary for us to implement some of our teaching ideas. Initially, however, it is we ourselves who must accept the challenge of improving reading

instruction--for all students, but especially for those for whom the schools have perhaps created a language barrier in learning to read more effectively. The change must come here (in our heads) and here (in our hearts).

Thank you.

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